

**COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM**  
**CONGRESSMAN TOM DAVIS, CHAIRMAN**



**NEWS RELEASE**

**For Immediate Release**  
**March 16, 2004**

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**Davis Continues to Probe US-VISIT Program**

***Requests Assurances from Ridge that Border Crossing Cards are Acceptable Substitute***

**Washington, D.C.** - House Government Reform Committee Chairman Tom Davis (R-VA) wrote yesterday to Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge seeking additional information about the implementation of the U.S. Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology (US-VISIT) program.

The Government Reform Committee held a March 4 hearing on the US-VISIT Program. When completed, the program will track the entry and exit of most non-immigrant visa holders who enter the United States.

In the March 15 letter, Davis notes he has some concerns about the plan to use the Border Crossing Card (BCC) to make it easier for some Mexican citizens to cross the border, specifically whether there are enough card readers to make the use of the cards effective. Davis said he also wants to make sure the BCC readers are integrated into the existing database collection systems.

"Used correctly, the BCC and reader can be a useful temporary tool at the southern border," Davis wrote. "However, the Administration must properly use this technology in order to create an acceptable substitution for the US-VISIT program."

A copy of the letter follows:

March 15, 2004

The Honorable Tom Ridge  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Homeland Security  
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Secretary Ridge:

I want to thank you for your Department's testimony on the US-VISIT program before this Committee on March 4, 2004. As a quick follow-up to the hearing, I wanted to give you my thoughts of the recently announced decision to exempt certain aliens from enrolling in US-VISIT. By and large I think this is a good idea. However, I am concerned about how the current Border Crossing Card (BCC) will be used to access the various databases, and I am also concerned that there may not be sufficient card readers to accommodate your goals.

Allowing people to use the BCC to cross the border without enrolling in US-VISIT may be a good temporary solution for the concerns many express about the potential crowds at the border when US-VISIT is implemented. I understand the BCC contains an optical strip that can hold a person's raw fingerprint data, a record of entries and exits, Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) Officers' comments, and other data. When coupled with a fingerprint scanner, the CBP Officer can authenticate that the person holding the card is in fact the person to whom the card was issued.

Unfortunately, since the card has been issued, it has not always been properly scanned and authenticated as it was originally intended. It would be unacceptable for CBP to continue to use the cards as they have been used since 2001. On March 11, DHS announced readers for BCCs would be deployed at the 50 busiest land ports of entry by the end of June 2004. This is welcomed news, but in order to make sure the nation receives the full benefit of this technology, it is important that the readers be deployed as they were initially intended. This includes integrating the readers into the existing database collection systems, as soon as possible.

Used correctly, the BCC and reader can be a useful temporary tool at the southern border. However, the Administration must properly use this technology in order to create an acceptable substitution for the US-VISIT program.

As a follow-up to last week's hearing, please answer the following questions for the record:

1. How is the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) getting the word out about US-VISIT? Are there mechanisms in place to see if the message is in fact getting across to foreign visitors, governments, and companies?
2. When will instructional videos be produced and distributed to airlines and ports of entry?
3. What is the status of the discussions regarding expanding US-VISIT to include travelers from countries that participate in the Visa Waiver Program?
4. Please comment on the Homeland Security Select Committee's minority report, "America at Risk, Closing the Security Gaps." Specifically, are these concerns better addressed through the newly created DHS or could these problems have been resolved without DHS?

5. US-VISIT is currently in the process of selecting a firm to act as the prime integrator to create the upcoming increments of the US-VISIT program. Please provide an update on where you are in the selection process. Do you expect to be able to make an award on schedule?
6. Is DHS setting into place a plan that will provide Congress timely information on actual processing times at airports and land borders so that we can gauge for ourselves how well the systems are functioning? When can we expect to receive this sort of data?
7. What steps is DHS taking to ensure that information that already exists in databases owned by the State Department and DHS, and information that is being collected under US-VISIT, will be shared so that the frontline officers in consulates and at the borders will have the right information at the right time to make the best decisions?
8. DHS used an expedited rulemaking process when it adopted the interim final rule on US-VISIT. This process is useful where time is critical to allow an agency to quickly establish a policy. In hindsight, was this the right approach? Does DHS have plans to reopen a public comment period after the rule has been in effect for a period of time?
9. Other stakeholders in the US-VISIT program are concerned about staffing at land and air border crossings.
  - a. How does DHS plan to staff the entry and exit facilities at land and air border crossings?
  - b. Do you foresee using US-VISIT staff only or will you rely on other resources?
  - c. How will DHS ensure that there are adequately trained personnel available to ensure that US-VISIT remains as small an intrusion as possible into the traveler's day?
  - d. Referring to ACI-NA President David Plavin's written testimony, it is evident that the number of international airline passengers traveling on a visa can as much as double during the summer months compared to the first few months of the calendar year. With this in mind, how does DHS plan to prepare for this surge (in terms of monitoring the efficiency and customer service of the entry process, and deploying additional staff when needed at airports)?
10. The 115 airports that are implementing the US-VISIT program are tremendously varied in their age, space constraints and needs regarding staffing for entry and exit functions. What steps are you taking to make sure that US-VISIT fits into each airport affected in a way that is most appropriate for that airport?

11. The aviation industry is concerned that government funding for US-VISIT will fail to cover the costs of full implementation. With the exit information collection system still to be decided, can DHS confirm that enough funding has been allocated, even without knowing what the exit portions of the US-VISIT program will manifest at each airport?
12. In the January hearing before the Select Committee on Homeland Security you discussed contingency plans that could be activated if wait times become too long at a port of entry. Have you had cause to activate these plans to date? Who would make the call to implement such a plan, and could you describe how these plans would work if they were implemented?

Please provide the answers to these questions to the Committee by March 29, 2004. I appreciate your commitment to the US-VISIT program and your willingness to continue to cooperate with the Committee.

Sincerely,

Tom Davis  
Chairman

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